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ABSTRACT

Dramatic play provides children an excellent way to express their feelings and perceptions of the world that surrounds them. It is also an alternative way for researchers and teachers to capture, understand, and interpret children's voices because of the difficulties that children have in expressing ideas through oral and written language. While dramatic play has been widely used in preschool education, it has been overlooked during the school years. This paper describes a program in theatrical expression, based on dramatic play, with urban children from ages 8 to 14 in a Colombian city. The program uses improvisations or play episodes created by the children without a written script. One of the purposes has been to explore a pedagogical alternative to the authoritarian relationship between teacher and students. The emphasis is on process rather than result and growth rather than entertainment. The creation process resembles qualitative research methods in the different stages of collecting ideas, interpreting children's dramatic plays, composing the final theatrical and musical production, and sharing it with an audience. Dramatic play experiences with older children are shown to provide an appropriate alternative learning approach which integrates several kinds of learning (e.g.; computers, language, culture, writing, the future). Unresolved questions are highlighted. (EMK)

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CHILDREN'S VOICES THROUGH DRAMATIC PLAY

Zayda Sierra

—Abstract—

Dramatic play provides children an excellent way to express their feelings and perception of the world that surrounds them. It is also an alternative way for researchers and teachers to capture, understand and interpret children's voices because the difficulties that children have in expressing their ideas through oral and written language. However, while dramatic play has been widely used in preschool education, it has been overlooked during the school years.

This paper (documented with a video and slides) describes a program in theatrical expression, based on dramatic play, with urban children from 8 years-old to adolescence in a Colombian city. The creation process resembles qualitative research methods in the different stages of collecting ideas, interpreting children's dramatic plays, composing the final theatrical and musical production, and sharing it with an audience.

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Children's voices through dramatic play*

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Paper presented at the 14th Annual Qualitative Analysis Conference.
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, August 8, 1997;
and at the 105th APA Annual Convention, Chicago, August 15, 1997.

Since 1979 I have been developing a program in Colombia to stimulate theatrical expression in school-aged children. In this presentation I will highlight some of the background and development of this program, the qualitative approach it requires to capture children's voices and to represent them in original theatrical productions, and several ideas for future directions of study.

The program uses improvisations or play episodes created by the children without a written script. Contrary to a traditional approach to theater as mere spectacle, and where the director makes all decisions (Castagnino, 1981), I consider theater an alternative way to facilitate children's expression of their perceptions of the world. I also conceive it as a space and time where children—with the cooperation of an adult—can talk, represent, and discuss ideas and themes that interest them.

One of the purposes of developing a program in theatrical expression with older children has been to explore a pedagogical alternative to the authoritarian relationship between teacher and students that has characterized Colombian education (Vernot, 1985; MEN-Saber, 1992, Batista, 1993). An authoritarian approach provides children few options to communicate their understanding of the world: the teacher speaks while the children should remain silent and, when they are allowed to speak, they should only say what their teachers have taught them. I

* This conference is accompanied with slides and a short video.

thought that allowing children to express their feelings and ideas through dramatic play would help their teachers to know them better and, consequently, to guide their learning in a more appropriate way. I also felt it was important to offer teenagers and adolescents a different space to express their own concerns and visualize alternatives for the future, in a similar way the New Latin American Theater was awakening social concern and compromise to participate in the transformation of society (see Garzón Céspedes, 1978).

Dramatic improvisations are based on play, which means that its emphasis is the process, not the result, and its focus is on participants' growth, not observers' mere entertainment (Combs, 1988; Spolin, 1977; Way, 1967). Improvisations in theater are closely related to what psychologists have described as symbolic, make-believe, representative, pretend or dramatic play in their studies of preschool children (Rosenberg, 1987). Dramatic play has been defined as simulative and nonliterate behaviors children use to transform the identities of objects, actions, and people (Pellegrini, 1985). In dramatic play, an object is used as if it were another, one person behaves as if she were another, and immediate time and place are treated as if they were otherwise and elsewhere (Fein, 1987). Pretending simulates and transforms routine events or scripts from family life, story books, and television (Bretherton, 1984). Dramatic play's role in cognitive development is crucial. Piaget (1962) recognized its significance in the construction of mental representations, and according to Vygotsky's theory, this imaginative play help children to separate thought from the surrounding world, and rely on ideas to guide behavior (Berk, 1994. Smolucha, 1992).

Dramatic play has also been a strategy used by children to express their feelings and emotional perceptions of reality. Consequently researchers and teachers have used it as an alternative method to capture, understand, and interpret

children's voices when children are experiencing difficulties expressing their ideas using oral and written language (Slade & Wolf,1994).

However, although dramatic or pretend play has been widely employed in preschool education, it has not been used as frequently in the later school years. Different reasons have been offered to explain this absence of dramatic play activities with school-aged children. One reason, according to Finkelstein (1987), is that Western culture's distinction between work and play has created a negative attitude toward the use of play as a viable teaching strategy. Gardner (1991) echoes this same sentiment when he comments on the prevailing perception of play as mere entertainment and, thus, an obstacle to serious learning. Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983) also noted that the decline of symbolic play in older children has been typically described as a normal developmental variable in traditional psychological paradigms. A good example to illustrate the opposition in Western culture between theater and school can be found in the classical story of Pinocchio (Collodi, 1972) who began his misfortune adventures the day he decided not to go to school, and instead to attend a puppet show.

My experience in using dramatic play with urban children from 8 years to 14 years old in Colombia has allowed me to observe the continued use of this activity by older children. I found that when older children are given space, time, encouragement, and guidance, at home and at school, they readily use dramatic play to express their feelings and perceptions of the world.

> *like to be in theatre because I have more friends to talk with, because I like to work in a group and because I feel in a good environment.*
>
> *(Felipe, 9)*

> *I like to be in theatre for the way they teach us to express ourselves and unveil our imagination.*
>
> *(Diana, 12)*

I like to dream, laugh and sing, and in our improvisations I can do those things. Here my ideas are taken into account, where in other places only adults rule.

(Alejandra, 13)

Creating stories through dramatic play

Dramatic play is also an enjoyable process to create original stories with the children, which later on can be transformed into a more artistic form. To illustrate this idea I will describe the creative process of "The Little Country of the Lost Dreams" (Sierra, 1994). This was the second original script and musical-theatrical performance created with the Children's Group of Theater of Universidad de Antioquia at Medellin, Colombia. The participants were 15 daughters and sons of employees, professors or students of the university. The creation process of this story and its transformation in a theatrical production took almost two years (1987-1988). It began by asking the children about topics that interested them. A constant theme was about a better future. What a puzzling idea! What did it really mean for them? I suggested that they dramatize situations about their present reality and how they envisioned the future. Because of violence in Medellin during those years (the war against the drug cartel, poverty and social crisis) and the influence of foreign TV, I discovered that these children's idea of a better future was related with leaving their country. Any other place was better for them to grow up than their own home land.

As an illustration, in one of their improvisations some of them played the role of visitors of the country and others played hosts. It was hard for the hosts to provide good reasons why to visit and stay in Colombia. The visitors instead found quick reasons why not to enter the country, like when a 9 years-old girl took a stick from the floor and transformed it in a telescope. "Looking" through it, she began to describe the next scene: "A lady just entered a grocery store. Now, she is leaving the

grocery store. Oh no! Somebody robbed her groceries! I do not want to go to that country!".

In the participants' written creations a similar situation appeared. The children were invited to imagine being in the 2020 year, organizing a meeting to see each other again. They were asked to write about their lives in those past years. All of them except one wrote that they became famous or got married in an European or North American country. I thought that Colombia would not have a better future if its new generations did not feel that it was worthy to live in. I also wondered why that lack of identity. I suggested they to survey other children and adults about their perception of the country. With a few exceptions in mentioning our natural resources, the beauty of our geographical landscapes, and how warm and friendly common people are, most of the answers stressed the negative aspects of life in Colombia: crime, insecurity, poverty, corruption...

I also discovered that our children knew more about Michael Jackson or Madonna than about our own cultural heritage. I asked myself: How are you going to feel that it is worthy to grow up in a country that you don't even know? How can you imagine a better future if you do not understand the past as a way to interpret the present and, therefore, what should be changed in the near future? There were many nights I spent trying to figure it out a story that would both not deny these children's concerns about their present reality, and offer them some hope and faith in themselves and in the Colombian people who also deserve a better place to live. And, the most difficult aspect, how to tell a story that--including all those serious concerns--was attractive, visually rich, humorous, and tender. A story that an audience of children and their parents could enjoy but also reflect about.

To provide an answer to these questions we organized a playwriting workshop to complement our improvisational sessions on Saturdays. We read new Colombian children literature: What were other authors thinking and writing about

Colombian issues for young people? We spent hours and hours in the computer lab of the university, laughing and worrying, creating and writing, preparing new stories to dramatize; selecting and dismissing ideas until the script began to take form. Shortly thereafter, the theatrical production process began giving shape to the characters, rehearsing all the scenes, adding music, scenery and costumes. We were still playing, but at the same time seeing our play transformed into a more polished work to share with a broader audience.

> *In each rehearsal we learn new things and grow in hopes to make a happier world. It is a work we do with much love and spirit.*
>
> *(Natalia, 12)*
>
> *We arouse creativity, construct new fascinating worlds, experience new sensations, and develop corporal expression.*
>
> *(Isabel, 13)*
>
> *It is good to know that we always have here a support, a big support, where we can express through improvisations the things we care about, feel and live.*
>
> *(Tania, 14)*

The Little Country of the Lost Dreams

A youth orchestra plays an overture. Then the lights illuminate a children's chorus and young actors who welcome the audience with an opening song:

Welcome to the magic of theatre!
Welcome to the game of "Once Upon a Time".
Once what? Once upon a time.
The game goes like this:
With our eyes open wide, we imagine a story
and we dream that it is real,

even though it is the craziest thing ever imagined,

too unreal, but so unreal,

that it seems a portrait of our own reality.

On stage enters Doña Juana (Mrs. Juana), a street vendor of candies. She does not understand why, being Sunday, the children have not appeared to buy her sweet treats. Somebody cries, and she discovers Little Newsvendor who has not gone to sell his newspapers. He explains to her that the news are very sad, too sad to sell them. All children are abandoning the country. Doña Juana reads: "Because the lack of guarantee to develop their dreams, the children are abandoning the country to grow up in other places". But Little Newsvendor could not go with them, no money to pay the ticket. Doña Juana found other three children who also could not leave because they were watching TV and were late to take their train. And now the government closed the borders. So here she is with the only four children left in the country. She worries. Without children she can not sell her candies, and... who said children can not find their dreams in their home land? She makes a bet with the four children that it is possible to find their dreams, but they need to search for them. So she offers to take them around the country in search of their dreams.

This is the beginning of a long journey. By train, boat, bus and the wings of a mother Condor, Doña Juana takes the children from the big city, to a small village, to the coast and through the jungle and mountain regions. As they travel, they find many problems, but they also discover the people and culture of their country: the music, carnivals, games, legends and dances. In the end, the children of the story find that their dreams are there within this new knowledge:

Who will build the dreams of tomorrow?

Who, without we, the children of today?

But dreams do not come from oblivion

They come from the things we know and love.

Dramatic play in the school setting

This collaborative production of children and a theater teacher impacted other educators who became interested in the prospect of creating stories through dramatic play. Various workshops were given to teachers across Colombia, which have facilitated that more and more school-aged children have the opportunity to express themselves through this art form. Also undergraduate programs in elementary education began to include the course "Theatrical Expression" as a required part of their curriculum.

The reflection and writing of the experience (Sierra, 1985; Sierra, 1988; Sierra, 1993; Sierra, 1995) has contributed to better map the meaning of this activity for students and teachers, originating at the same time new theoretical and methodological questions. For example, how direct is the relationship between the context and the content of the stories created by dramatic play in older children? Do they replicate, distort or reflect on their reality (family, school, community) when enacting it? How are individual differences, gender, and cultural background reflected in children's creations when they are engaged in dramatic play? In a recent comparative study with elementary children from different grades and diverse social-economical conditions (Sierra, 1996), I attempted to address these questions, but more studies are necessary.

Unlike young children's play, dramatic play in the school setting requires a leader that stimulates the pretend situation (Rosenberg, 1987). Why school-aged children need a leader to continue pretending is a question not addressed yet, but certainly without the encouragement of an adult who provides the proper circumstances, older children use less and less dramatic language to make sense of the world and communicate their ideas.

Future directions

Besides a skillful knowledge in different improvisational strategies and games, dramatic play needs a sensitive teacher who asks questions and challenges assumptions. In which direction should adults interact with children as they are being guided in representing and reflecting about their assumptions of their own reality? This leads to a complementary area of inquiry: The role of development. As Smagorinsky (1995) says: "The idea of development is problematic in that it suggests some sense of telos, or path towards a desired, positive, or optimal sense of completion. It therefore raises the question, development towards what?" (p. 194). Recent discussions related to ethical issues in ethnographic and qualitative approaches may provide interesting insights to the different conceptions of development and how to approach children's representation of their world through a media like dramatic play.

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